

stay in the dark by ceruleanstorm

Series: (something strange in your neighborhood) [5]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Fluff so much fluff, im back on those mileven shenanigans again, jim hopper being the world's best dad, jk he's a giant dork that steals casseroles, just holding hands and being super sweet, mike and jim having an actual conversation without them screaming at eachother, mike the bad boy, mike's first time at the cabin, ted wheeler being the world's worst dad, what it's really like having curly hair, why can't the suffer bros just let finn keep his curls those cowards

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Summary:

Mike's waited 23 days to see Eleven again after she saved the damn world. But there's a big reason El isn't as excited to see him.

(i promise it's cute and fluffy!)

stay in the dark

Author's Note:

hey there mileven readers, it's ya girl, savannah

@thecakegoesmeow asked for mike and eleven bonding in the cabin and Mike seeing El's curls for the first time. Et Voila!

“What’s going on in there?” Chief Jim Hopper shouted, for the fifth time- and yes, he was counting. He stood outside the bathroom door, conveniently locked, knocking again. “Come on, kiddo it’s been like an hour.”

“20 minutes!” she yelled from behind the locked door.

Hopper looked around to show the empty room the confusion on his face. “What?” he shouted back.

“You said an hour!” he heard her yell again, “it’s only be *twenty* minutes.”

“It’s called an exaggeration, El. Wasn’t that your word of the day, what, like a week ago? I’d have thought you would have that one down, you sure seem to like ‘em.” he mused, laughing at his own joke. When the teenager behind the door didn’t respond, Hopper let out a sigh of exasperation. Guess it was still too early to start using Dad Jokes on her. “Listen, he’s gonna be here any minute. You gonna stay in there the whole time he’s here?”

El’s reflection in the mirror frowned at her, and she untangled her goopy hands from her head. “Stupid hair,” she grumbled, her shoulders falling.

“What’d you say?” she heard her Hopper’s muffled voice ask. El’s forehead collided with the mirror as she let it drop, giving up altogether and letting her hands hang down by her sides.

“My hair.” El half whispered. Her eyes trained in on the the other girl in the mirror, her mind focused on the curls that stuck up way behind

her head, willing them to obey and lay flat. They began to fall back in slow motion, El finally smiling. *Stay*, she prayed.

When her hair first started to grow in the lonely winter she'd wandered the woods, El was hopeful for the first time since she left Mike's window so many nights before. It stuck out all around her forehead and ears, she noticed when she looked in the water's reflection, and tickled her neck. She'd wash it every day, first making the trek to the small stream before she had to break the thin layer of ice to reach the freezing water. Her hands would go numb as she poured handful after handful of water to her hair, her head bent over her knees, as far out as her neck would stretch so she wouldn't get her clothes wet.

Then the Chief found her and took her to cabin. There her hair began to grow for real and the strands would coil around her finger and bounce when she stretched the hazelnut locks out.

"Huh," her new guardian ruffled her hair one morning as she can into the kitchen, sleep making her shuffle and her hair stick out in every direction, "curls. Never thought you'd have curls."

El wanted her hair- her curls- to be like the women she watched on TV. Their hair was big in the best way, and long too. Their curls were big and bounced when they walked. Perfect she called them, asking Hopper one night to get her hairspray like the beautiful TV stars used. He turned her down, telling her that her hair was too short and the curls too small.

Real curly hair was not like the curly hair on TV. It stuck up weird ways when El slept on it wrong. It got tangled and was hard to run a comb through. It was frizzy like a bitch (as Hopper would say) and never, *ever* did what she wanted it too. Through an extensive combination of whining, pouting, and begging, Hopper was convinced to get her some gel like on TV. Gel was better, gel wouldn't make her pass out in the boarded up cabin. It still wouldn't do what she wanted it too.

Eleven waited a few seconds, staring back at herself. Now it looked good. Still not like the women on TV, but better than before. Now she could go and see Mike.

But just as she started to wash the gel out of her hands, little curly q's began to pop on her head. "Ugh!" she slammed her hands on the cold sink, accidentally hitting herself in the face with a toothbrush that she'd sent flying, like everything else in the bathroom. She stuck her hands back into the tiny plastic container of gel, trying not to think about how it felt like the grime and slime in the Upside Down, and stuck her hands back in her mess of curls.

Back outside in the cabin's small living room, Hopper let out another sigh and reached into his pocket for his pack of Camels and lighter. He knew he shouldn't indulge inside the walls of the cabin as El's lungs were incredibly sensitive (hence the no hairspray rule) but there were just moments where raising a teenage girl called for it.

As he put the small lighter back into his pockets, there was a knock on the door. Hopper let out a long breath of smoke before putting the cigarette out and opening the door.

Wheeler stood there, (damn, was the kid *already* this close to his height?), eyes full of hope and a giant smile on his face that Hopper wouldn't have recognized a year ago. He skipped the introductions, simply pointing to the tupperware dish Mike held in his hands.

"What's in that?"

A look of surprise came over the kid's face. "Uhh... macaroni casserole?" he told the older man as if it were a question. "My mom made it for you guys?"

"Oh, uh, well tell her we said thanks. Come on in, kid." Hopper stepped to the side to let the boy pass through. "You made sure you weren't followed, right?"

"Yeah, there was no one out there but me. I took a detour just in case, you know, to throw anyone off." explained Wheeler.

Hopper nodded then gestured to the bathroom door. "El's in there. I don't know what she's doing, but she hasn't come out in a while."

"Oh." Mike's face fell. "Did- did you say something to her?"

"Why, you gonna beat me up again kid?" he deadpanned. The kid

stepped back, shaking his head.

“No! I mean no sir.” Mike corrected. He then looked from the Chief to the door El was behind, then back to the chief. The older man stared at him still, as if he was gauging how best to get rid of him and how he was going to hide the body. Mike swallowed, rolling on the balls of his feet.

It was then Hopper turned and knocked on the bathroom door again, but his eyes never left Mike where he was standing. “He’s here, kid.”

El said something, and Mike strained to hear. It was so odd, hearing her voice again, but he knew he could never give it up, listening to her. It brought him hope for the first time after the 353 days of the most painful and lonely silence he’d ever heard. That said, he couldn’t make out her quiet words. He watched, the look on Hopper’s face one of confusion.

“What?” Hopper replied, running his hand through his hair. Mike wondered if he was allowed to sit on the couch while they worked this out. “El, sweetie, you look fine. It’s only gonna get worse if you keep messing with it like that.”

Inside the bathroom, Eleven was holding a purple comb up to the mirror with a set look on her face, seconds away from ripping it through her hair. She could hear Mike’s voice floating in through the door, the butterflies in her stomach erupting. All those nights she spent visiting him, listening to his sweet voice getting lower and lower. She was beginning to think she’d never hear it anywhere outside her head again. And now it was real.

It was also keeping her from brushing the sticky curls out. He’d have to see them eventually, and she was tired of locked doors being in her way of being him. Throwing the comb down, El unlocked the door just as Hopper announced, “Mike’s here kid, he doesn’t care what you look like.”

She stepped out the bathroom door and it was like time stopped. It was just Mike and El, just like the night she’d walked back into his life. And the way he looked at her...

They were back in each other's arms instantly, Mike still in shock, still trying to convince himself she was actually real. *She's real. She's here. Never let her go again.*

It had been an uphill battle to convince the adults who orchestrated their lives they should be allowed to see each other. Well, sort of. To his shock, it wasn't the Chief standing in the way, but Mike's parents.

"Kid, look," the Chief had come to him the night El had closed the gate. The two stumbled home after coming back from the lab and El had fallen asleep on Mrs. Byers' couch. As much as he wanted to talk to her, desperate to hear her voice again, he knew she'd just saved the goddamn world and needed rest. So he sat by her on the couch, hands in jacket pockets, eyes tracing the blood on the floor left by the terrifying Billy Hargrove. Then the Chief sat next to him. Just like it was nothing. "I'm not going to keep you from her anymore."

"What?" Mike stared at the man in disbelief.

"Every day was harder than last," the Chief sighed, putting his hat back on, "all she wanted was to see you again. And I'm gonna make sure it happens. She saved all our asses and Doctor Owens knows it. She's gonna have a normal life this time, I'm going to make sure of it."

Mike's hands shook. He had expected this man to despise him after all the hateful things he yelled and the way he crumbled into a million pieces in front of him. "Thank... thank you sir."

"Don't thank me yet," he said, pulling out a cigarette and lighter. "It might be a while."

And it was awhile. 23 days. Mike had come close to counting the hours before he got the go ahead from the Chief. And then there was his Mom and Dad.

"It's not happening." His mom told him, hands on her hips. "That girl is not good for you."

"Not good for me?" Mike had shouted back, voice echoing off the tile in the kitchen. "You talk about her like she's dangerous!"

“She is dangerous, Michael!

“Not to me!” defended Mike. “El would *never* hurt me!”

“You seem to be forgetting all of last year.” his father shook his head as he lounged in that stupid La-Z-boy.

Mike ran his hands through his hair in frustration. They didn’t know El the way did. If they did they would care, like Hopper did, but they hadn’t cared all year. “That wasn’t her fault!”

His father just stared at him over the rim of his newspaper. “Not happening, son. Now apologize to your mother.”

Mike had ended up sneaking out *and* stealing the casserole.

And he was thanking his lucky stars (and Nancy for letting him use her window) that he’d gotten away with it as he hugged her. Mike was so dead later, but it was so worth it.

“You should give him a tour.” the Chief said from behind them. He had flopped onto the living room sofa, the sound of a beer can echoing in Mike’s ears. He just couldn’t believe this was real. It felt so much like a dream, and one way too good to be true.

El took his hand in hers and he bit his lip, trying not to blush. “Come with me.” El whispered to him, pulling him away.

“This is living room. Over there is the kitchen.” she told him with a small voice. “And this is our TV. It’s how I used to listen to you.”

“Like- like you did with the radio?” Mike asked her and she nodded.

“You were always in the fort. You never took it down.” whispered El. They walked into her room together, the tour forgotten as they sat cross legged on her floor. Mike looked around the room, taking it all in. He saw books, some of his most favorite among the list, scattered on her floor and her bed. There were notebooks and crayons all over her covers, drawings on the walls everywhere, and a tiny little pile of stuffed animals arranged from smallest to largest by her pillows. He let out a little laugh. They looked like a family.

"She's gonna have a normal life this time, I'm going to make sure of it."

When the guilt haunted him the worst, he sat in the fort, trying to push thoughts of Eleven lonely and cold and crying in the lab, trapped forever by those horrible men and women. But all Mike could ever imagine in those moments was how he had a mom and dad and a warm house, a Christmas every year, how he got to go to school and have friends, and how she would never have any of that now.

But not anymore. Mike really was going to have to thank the Chief for what he had done, even if it still infuriated him to his core.

"I couldn't take it down." Mike told her. He looked up and there she was, so close to him. Wondering if she knew how magnetic she could be, Mike glanced back down at the floor. "I just couldn't give up hope, you know?"

El nodded her head. *Now*, a voice in her head rang, *you should ask now*. But she couldn't make herself, she just kept wanting to look at his pretty face a freckles.

"I missed you. Everyday." El said instead. The smile on his face made her feel warm, and she wove her fingers with his.

"Me too. Everyday." Mike was getting closer, closer, closer- but then he pulled back from her, hesitance written in his worried expression.

El's face fell. Did he not want to kiss her like he did that night at school? Every time she would watch her soap operas while Hopper was away, and the characters on screen would kiss, yelling things about passion and attraction she didn't quite understand, she'd think of Mike's kiss. It was different from TV. It was innocent, her moment to realize Mike liked her enough to trust her with this gesture. Her moment to realize Mike didn't need her to be normal or safe or pretty to still be worthy. For now she didn't want what she saw on the TV, she just wanted what they had that night in the cafeteria.

There could only be one reason he didn't want to kiss her.

"Do you hate my hair?" she threw the question at him. El sat back,

holding her breath and waiting for the worst to come.

“Your hair?” Mike’s eyebrows furrowed. He looked lost. “Why would I hate your hair?”

Where is this coming from? Two seconds they were about to kiss- until it occurred to his moronic self that he was probably making her uncomfortable. Couldn’t they have one conversation without his selfishness getting in the way? *She doesn’t want to kiss you, Wheeler. She wants to talk, like a normal person. Get over yourself.*

El sighed. “You didn’t say anything about it. When you came in.”

I’m a dumbass was his most prevalent thought. “El- I’m sorry. I guess... I guess I just didn’t think about it?”

That was not the right thing to say, he realized as her face fell. Why was he so bad at talking to her?

“You hate it, don’t you? The curls. They aren’t pretty.” El knew she should have tried harder to get her hair to stay in the bathroom. She should’ve brushed it out with that stupid comb. There was so much gel in it, of course he wouldn’t say anything about it.

Then Mike was taking her hand again. It was a silent plea to get her to look at him. “I like your hair El. It’s...” deep breath, “pretty.”

The smile on her face made him catch his breath, worried his brain would forget how to if he kept looking at her. Which he planned on doing for the rest of his life. “I never expected you to have curly hair. But it’s cool- I mean, it’s pretty- I mean it’s pretty cool, ah dammit.” Mike put his face down. He must have been as red as a freaking tomato.

“Thank you, Mike.” El whispered. Her stomach was on fire. Whoever said butterflies just fluttered about in your stomach was wrong. All they did was kick.

“I used to have curly hair.” Mike told her.

“You did?”

“When I was a baby. My mom started brushing them out when I got older. Sometimes when it’s really humid the ends will curl.” he reached behind himself to the back of his head, pulling on a strand of hair that wanted to coil around his fingers. “See?”

El nodded, almost reaching out to touch his hair. She still had that breathtaking smile on her face. “I don’t like it.”

“The curls?” he asked.

“They don’t ever look like I want them to. I put this gel in but it doesn’t help.”

Mike’s lip were upturned in a sort of smile and he was nodding in agreement. “I like it, I think it looks good. It’s... it’s unique.”

“Is unique good?” El ventured. She didn’t know how but their fingers were intertwined again.

“Unique is awesome!” he told her with a little laugh, *his* laugh, and then something in El changed.

When she spent the day with Kali, her lost sister had said it was as if El had replaced this hole inside her, that El made her whole. It had torn El to break away from Kali, to give her up and walk away without looking back, but she had to go home. She understood now what Kali had meant.

Because sitting here with Mike she realized there had been this hole inside her, eating her alive every day they’d been apart, everyday she’d been without him.

They were close again, and El was not backing down this time. She closed the infinite distance that hung between them, tired of being apart. This kiss, it was different than that night in the cafeteria, because they weren’t running out of time wondering if they were going to be found. This was much better. His fluttered shut, and he kissed her back, her racing mind suddenly calm.

So much for she doesn’t want to kiss you. They broke apart (reluctantly) and Mike racked his head, desperate for something romantic to say. *Don’t mess this up! Don’t mess this up, you idiot!*

“Wow.” was all he could think of, and that they were totally doing that again.

El was memorizing the look of wonder on his face. How had she ever managed to be apart from him? He wanted to kiss her, and was okay not kissing her like couples did on TV. He brought her macaroni casserole for her and Hopper even though he was still mad at him. He liked her hair even though she thought it wasn't pretty enough. Mike. *Her* Mike.

“Yeah.” she squeezed his hand. “Wow.”

She was whole again.

Author's Note:

thank you so much for reading. it's fun to be back here. if anyone has any requests, I can take em here or hmu on tumblr @sstrangerthaneleven (also hmu if you want to talk to me about my new christmas au coming up because im so damn excited about it and just want to talk to someone about it.)